Special Section: Family Portraits

An Ingathering of Angels

by Roy Benton

Night after night the five of us boys would go out Ingathering dressed like little angels. Wearing pure white smocks and oversize red bows at the neck, we sang as sincerely as was possible for eight- and nine-year-olds on those blustery Denver nights when a permanent bed of ice glazed the sidewalk and the frigid air flared in your nostrils, instilling a steady sinus ache by the third hour. Ricky and his mother Opal would knock on apartment doors, holding up the blue-gray oval can with the incomprehensible words "For Humanity" arched over a golden torch, a carefully crumpled and suggestive dollar bill protruding from the top.[1] They handed out the literature showing starving people in ragged clothes, and gave their pitch about "helping the poor and needy." The other four of us would put on a face which was half inner sincerity and half role-playing in the angelic mode. Building by building and floor by floor we sang until we got hoarse, with a harmony which I remember to be as excellent as the heavenly host could possibly have achieved over Bethlehem.

We all went to the same Adventist school and church in Denver, and around Christmas time in the late 1950s we would be mightily puffed up by the compliments that poured in on us from this supporting community. Ricky's dad Chuck was the local auctioneer, and it is no surprise that Ricky later took over the business, for even then he showed promise of surpassing his father's skills as a salesman. On Ingathering nights, we would often run out of apartment buildings to canvass as a caroling unit. When we split up to go house to house, sometimes Ricky and I would work opposite sides of the same street. I would surreptitiously cut across lawns, cross over at the end of the block to come back and meet him, working twice as many houses, but he'd still be beating me to the Minuteman goal. One year he earned our awe as the first kid to ever reach the Jasper Wayne.[2]

This was hard on my worldview at the time. Though painfully short of perfect, I was still plainly several levels of piety above Ricky, who was frequently loud and coarse, even around girls. He was always the first to defy the Pathfinder leaders and the least likely to testify at the end of a week of prayer. I would watch him while we were singing and try to discover the source of his success, but I never did. Even today I still recoil reflexively when I hear someone say, "I already gave at the office." But somehow Ricky could slip such counterpunches, so that people in the apartments seldom slammed the door on him—and never knew the way he cynically mocked them once we got outside. Nevertheless, we had discovered—I guess by an unconscious adaptation to selective pressures, as the modern biologists would put it—that we were all better served if the rest of us sang, he and his mom solicited, and we all split the proceeds, which ranged from $25 to $50 on a good night.

Robin, the pudgy and steady soprano with the thick glasses, was the son of a plump, gregarious nurse, who confused us all by being obviously faithful to the truth while wearing red lipstick. We figured she was trying to please Robin's father, a slightly built usher at the local dog-track, who came to church on his off days and was the perennial project for conversion. Robin always claimed that his dad would join the church as soon

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as he had built up enough money to get a new job that didn't require Sabbath work. Sure enough, a couple of years later, he did.

Stacy could easily be led off the melody, so we had to put him out on the end next to the other soprano. We sensed he would never be kicked out altogether, since his mother was the music teacher at the school and served as our initial coach. Also, his dad was the school principal.

During Ingathering, my freckled brother Davey and I generally honored a truce in our war of sibling rivalry, becoming companions in both music and mischief. Though Davey was the youngest in our group, he had the best musical sense. He easily held his own on the alto part of "Silent Night" when I left him alone to sing a tenor descant above the melody. Often my mother would take Opal's place as chaperone, and she would reward us at the end of the evening by fixing homemade snowcones from fresh snow and grape juice concentrate. At that time she was a homemaker and part-time teacher, and my dad was a carpenter.

When I think of Christmas, the memories of these Ingathering nights have the highest resolution, even sharper than the visits from the cousins and the yearly rounds we made as a family to see all the decorated houses. The Ingathering night would begin when we received our assignment, and I learned the lesson early that in fact lurks behind every congressional attempt at reapportionment—the "territory" you get means everything. We kids were bitter at the dregs that would be left us after the adults had picked things over. My dad's slick quartet, which fortunately operated mostly on weekends, would steal all the prime apartment houses, where they could make $150 a night. On one of those evenings when we were forced to go house-to-house, we actually got to the home of Kathy, by repute the poorest girl in my class, where we had once taken a Thanksgiving basket. Her mother, like many others on her block, gave some pennies and nickels. Seldom would her neighbors say, as people in the richer sectors often did, "we're pretty poor and needy ourselves."

One night we had received some good territory, dense in apartment buildings, where exotic worldly smells exuded into overheated halls. Though "No Soliciting" signs often scolded from the front window, we would enter boldly on behalf of our legitimate and superior cause. Abetted by subtle adult casuistry, we convinced ourselves that we couldn't actually be soliciting since our carols and literature benefited not only the generous and enlightened, but even those who refused or claimed they gave to a mere secular recipient like the United Way.

Anyway, on this particular night we had even been invited into a couple of apartments where there were holiday parties going on. As the revelers enticed us to peform our entire sacred and secular repertoire, we instinctively gathered that

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it was time to crank out our best. We were rewarded when the guests, tipsy with good cheer, put down their long-stemmed glasses and went for their wallets in a big way. Because of our success, we were swollen with good cheer ourselves. The shrinking authority of my mother was not enough to keep us from "cutting up," as our parents called it back then, while we ran from building to building, giggling, pinching, trying to outdo each other sliding on the ice, and bellowing out the nonsense lyrics of "Catalina Ratalina . . ." Finally my mother ran out of escalated threats. As we boisterously erupted from a building into its U-shaped courtyard, she decided to make a spectacle of punishing me for the benefit of the others. Unable in her first few tries to land a respectable blow through all my winter padding, she ordered me to bend over. She lifted my angel smock and overcoat, the way a football quarterback used to raise up the towel on the back of the center as he came up behind the line, then belted me with all her strength (which fortunately was a lot less than that of Ricky's mom Opal). While I was letting out false whoops of pain, a female voice from the third story thundered as if from on high: "Stop it now,

stop hurting those darling little boys! You should be reported!"

When my mother suddenly froze under the spotlight of public shame, I gained unforgettable instruction about the interplay between reality and appearances, about how we make the world safe for hypocrisy. Some other lessons about hypocrisy have come since I shed my naïveté. Only later would I learn that my church had enough hubris at that time to collect money in the name of "humanity" and put it directly into its operating budget.

But my naïveté obscured some positive lessons as well. Little did I know that some people really do give at the office, until it hurts. Little did I realize that I was being bound silently at night to a community around the image of the Christchild, to a vision that values compassion and cooperation in serving the whole human family.

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1. Last names are omitted in this story to protect the innocent; or, rather, to partially protect those who were probably a lot more innocent at the time of this story than my possibly distorted recounting allows, and who may or may not be innocent now.

2. For the uninitiated, the Minuteman and Jasper Wayne awards went to those raising $25 and $130, respectively. Around 1958, we were told that $25 would keep the entire "worldwide work" of Seventh-day Adventists going for one minute.